

TV Multiversity

Documentary Film, Educational Television, World Cinema

24 September 2018

Coach Carter and the Lone Quest for Winning in Life



One of the most powerful speeches of the 2005 American film *Coach Carter* was delivered inside a library, which may seem odd for a sports movie. The basketball team had been prohibited from playing and was forced to study. The one who made that decision, head coach Ken Carter, was facing the toughest challenge in his career: make his players study while pressure from the school and the community could have put not only his job but also his life in danger. It could be easier anywhere else but not in America, where high school sport is a dominant cultural event and the gym or the stadium is the sacred temple of not only the school but the whole community behind it.

Coach Carter - Trailer



A sports movie perhaps is never about the sport itself. For instance, *Moneyball* (2011) is about the statistics and economic efficiency versus the conventional intuition, or *Friday Night Lights* (2004) is a continuing snapshot of a moment when winning a high school football game is more important for the community, i.e. the adults, rather than the players themselves. Coach Carter becomes more ecstatic when the story moves to the library. The audience soon realizes this is not about basketball anymore, but life.

Coach Carter sets up its reality with images of a locker room full of angry kids, streets fill with thug gangs, and a school with a security check heavier than an airport. This is not a suburb for a teenager to have a typical education but an inner-city street education with a violent tendency, the need to show masculinity, and the higher chance of joining gangs, going to jail or death. The Richmond Oilers old head coach realized that time has gotten the best out of him. So he reached out to Ken Carter, who was a superstar student athlete at Richmond High, now a decent businessman to become his replacement. Carter knew the job would not be easy, and a radical change must be implemented. On the first training with the team, he proposed to the team a contract and two choices: sign the contract then play, or not.

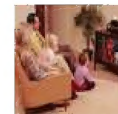
The contract was a laughable and debatable issue among the kids, their parents and the school when they first heard about it, simply because it has nothing to do with basketball. It requested the players to have GPA over 2.3, full class attendances, must sit in the front row and wearing shirt and tie on game day. The implication of the contract is clear. First, it makes the kids become more professional from the appearance. Then, it tries to contractually coerce them into present at class and achieving an acceptable result.



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Carter had to resort to such a forceful method because he was alone in his belief. Growth in the same environment and provided the same options, he knows so well what is the most likely future for them. It is definitely not a bright one. However, the community and the school think otherwise. While the school was failing at academic so hard that the principal had to convince herself that basketball was the only possible highlight of the kids, then the community also considered basketball not only the sole highlight but the sole opportunity to fame and stability in life. That illusion has been feeding to the whole community for generations and it was just not easy to break the cycle. Thus, Carter was alone because his reason and vision were replied by protest, anger and violence. The contract was not fulfilled by the players so he locked the gym up and told them let study. The extreme action was responded by more protest and violence. Up to this point, it was not up to the man anymore.

Carter's lone quest is indeed nostalgic and romantic, but when we examine deeper into its context and other factors, we were struck by the obscurity or negativity of its portrayal. The school, embodied in the principal, was the villain of the story. The community reacted to Carter with protest, threat and anger. The teachers who helped the kids were overshadowed by Carter himself, they are barely known in the story.

[This essay is by Manh Toan Ho, a 2017 graduate of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in Japan. He is currently a researcher in Vietnam.]

Posted by TVM at 8:02 AM Labels: [Americas](#), [Education](#), [Psychology](#)



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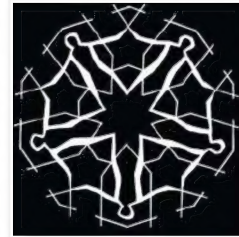
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